

'She's ghosted us,' Pioneer teacher says of superintendent

By Gordon Weeks
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On Jan. 11, Pioneer Elementary and Middle School students and teachers were given about 20 minutes notice to evacuate the schools due to an outbreak of COVID and staff shortages.

For seven school days, instructors taught remotely, which was a challenge for three teachers who don't have internet at their homes. Some teachers gave lessons while sitting in their cars in the middle school parking lot.

Teachers shared their challenges and concerns Tuesday evening at the Pioneer School Board meeting conducted via Google. They also asked about the absence of Superintendent Jill Diehl, a month after the members of the Pioneer Education Association gave Diehl a vote of no confidence and asked her to resign. Diehl did not attend Tuesday's meeting.

"She's ghosted us," said kindergarten teacher Tawnya Chemers. "She disappeared. That's not the leadership we're looking for."

After the sudden closure Jan. 11, the district announced no school would be conducted the following day. Parents were informed the closure was based on Mason County Public Health recommendations. Remote learning followed until Jan. 21, with students and teachers returning to the buildings Monday.

During the building closures, teachers were told they could teach in the middle school parking lot, without access to bathrooms, heat or a desk, said teacher Deneen Phelan. They can't teach online at Starbucks because both the teacher and the students get animated, she said.

"The parking lot and Starbucks are not real solutions," Phelan said.

Teacher Connie Bingham said students and staff members were given 20 minutes to leave the building. The next day, parents had until noon to



Pioneer Elementary School second-grade teacher Meagan MacKenzie, left, and then-principal Amy Koster greet students receiving online instruction in October 2020. MacKenzie taught from her car during seven days of remote learning. Journal file photo by Gordon Weeks

come collect their children's school supplies, and some couldn't make it, she said.

"For the students, we need to conduct the pivots in a timely and orderly manner," Bingham said.

Chemers said the superintendent hasn't been present much since the vote of no confidence a month ago. The unions for the teachers and paraeducators are working on new contracts — will Diehl be available to negotiate, she asked.

"Who do we go to when issues come up?" Chemers asked.

Secretary Trish Amundson said the district should reach out to every employee who has left in the past year and conduct exit interviews as part of a district evaluation that's being conducted. The district should try to find out how it lost some "amazing" employees, she said.

The board last month voted to hire Paula Akerlund, a former superintendent, to conduct a

comprehensive administrative review of the district. Her report is expected in mid-February.

The comments by teachers Tuesday came after the school board met for a 40-minute executive session. The council emerged from that closed meeting without taking a vote or mentioning what they discussed.

The Pioneer Education Association submitted a letter to the Pioneer School Board at its Dec. 14 meeting. In the letter, the group states that if Diehl does not resign, the board should ask her to do so.

"We all believe these problems directly stem from an inability or unwillingness of the superintendent to provide effective, competent, compassionate and trustworthy leadership for the district," the letter states. "These problems have had a corrosive effect on staff morale and fostered a climate of fear, anxiety and uncertainty."

Diehl has been the superintendent

for a year and a half after replacing John Gummel.

The introduction to the letter states, "Efforts to bring these issue to the attention of the board have been routinely met with resistance or been undermined through information suppression, covert intimidation and parliamentary maneuvering."

In the letter, the Pioneer Education Association writes that Diehl "has created an increasingly toxic, fearful and hostile work environment."

Staff members said they have experienced, and/or know someone, who has experienced Diehl being "bullying, intimidating and demeaning" in interactions with staff and community members; disrespecting staff members who are trying to solve problems; denying requests for due process representation during one-on-one sessions with Diehl; and asking the school nurse to "subvert protocols" regarding COVID. The nurse resigned.

The union also claims Diehl directed a building administrator and staff member to report to work while living with COVID-positive people or having COVID, in violation of health standards.

The PEA states that it conducted a survey of 38 union members between Dec. 6 and 9. The responses were on a four-point scale, with 1 being "strongly disagree" and 4 being "strongly agree."

In the survey, 37 out of 38 stated they agree or strongly agree that they feel supported by other teachers and paraeducators at their schools.

But asked whether they trust the district administration, 33 said they strongly disagree and three said they disagree. No one said they strongly agree they trust the administration.

At Tuesday's meeting, the board elected Soosi Day as the new chairwoman, and Stephanie Schlitz as the vice chairwoman. Robert Clark was sworn in as the new board member in position 3.

SCHOOL BRIEFS

Students achieve honor at Spokane college

Shelton natives Jael Adams and Gregory Jenney earned spots on the honor roll for the fall quarter at Spokane Community College. To be eligible, a student must earn a GPA of 3.0 or better.

Roberton has perfect GPA

Christinia Roberton of Shelton earned a perfect 4.0 GPA for the fall semester at Bismarck State College on Bismarck, North Dakota.

That earned her a spot on the president's honor roll.

SHS students stage romantic comedy

The Shelton High School theater department stages the romantic comedy "Almost, Maine" at 7 p.m. Feb. 11, and 2:30 and 7 p.m. Feb. 12 in the school's Performing Arts Center.

Admission is the suggested donation of \$5 for students, \$10 for adults. Face masks are required, and seating will be assigned for distancing.

■ Compiled by reporter Gordon Weeks

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